CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT

Knowing me, knowing you: using creative methods to highlight challenges and discover identity and context in an action research study

Catherine Buckley

Northridge House Education and Research Centre, St. Luke's Home, Mahon, Cork, Ireland
Email: catherine.buckley@stlukeshome.ie

Abstract
Background: The process of reflecting is one that is said to help both researchers and practitioners define and explore issues that arise in their work. It can be used to critically examine things that are going badly, or to look at things that are going well and to see how that happened and what can be done to continue the trend.
Aims: This article is a critical reflection of my experience of using reflection during my doctoral studies. It focuses on reflection using creative methods, for highlighting challenges and discovering identity and context.
Implications for practice:

- The process of reflection can highlight challenges and approaches needed when implementing a change initiative
- Using creative methods of reflection can open up (unlock) new ways of knowing, encourage a more in-depth exploration of experiences and promote dialogue

Keywords: Reflection, narrative, practice development, identity, person-centredness, creativity

Introduction
While undertaking a PhD, using an action research approach, I became aware that as a practice development researcher it was necessary to pay attention to my self-identity along with the identity of the participants involved in practice change. It is true that a novice researcher undertaking a PhD thesis is undertaking a process of change, both self-change and professional change. What is also true is that change is difficult and often disruptive. As a novice researcher, I had not anticipated this disruption, to my self-identity and to my psyche; nor had I anticipated the challenges that would occur in the study due to this disruption within others. The following is an account of the reflective process that occurred in that study. It will focus on the use of a reflective journal, EVOKE cards and narrative poetry as critically creative methods to enable learning about self and others and to identify challenges that occurred.

Background
The study involved the development, implementation and evaluation of a framework of narrative practice, in two older adult residential care settings (Buckley et al., 2014). This framework is underpinned by person-centredness (McCormack and McCance, 2010), practice development (Manley et al., 2008) and narrative (Clandinin and Connelly, 2004) approaches to care. The reflections in this article were undertaken using a reflective stream of consciousness narrative approach (Diaz, 2013), in line with the study. The reflections are excerpts from my personal journal, which was maintained throughout the study, to illustrate points of interest. Starting out on this journey to becoming an action researcher presented me with both an opportunity and a challenge: the opportunity to develop a workable model that may in some way assist staff to improve their care of older adults in residential care settings, and what I thought would be the challenge of doing that within the confines of a PhD study. However, while doing action research as part of a time-specific study is challenging, for me a far greater challenge was the unsettling reality of reflective self-identity and the need to be authentic within a cultural context.

Knowing me, knowing you (a journey towards discovery of self and others)
As my PhD journey began I had high hopes and a set of preconceived ideals. I was excited to be looking at the culture and being involved in a change process, and along the way I hoped to influence the growth and development of staff. I was aware that it would not be an easy process, but I had aspirations and an idea of how to gain staff participation and involvement. What was a struggle for me and for the staff involved was the need to be reflexive and to use that reflection to change practice but also to change our own preconceived ideas and ways of working.

The process of reflecting is one that is said to help both researchers and practitioners define and explore issues that arise in their work (Taylor, 2002). Reflection is assisted by how we place ourselves in the world or, according to Heidegger, (1962) 'being-in-the-world'. Our being in the world therefore influences our understanding of a situation, and it is also shaped by how others involved perceive the event. Johns (2005) describes reflection as a way of reinforcing our sense of self and reflective practice, as defending the knowledge we possess of our self and our experiences. Several theorists (Frank, 2000; Merleu-Ponty, 2002; Dewing, 2008) believe we have an urge as humans to become more than we are, to be more than the self we start with to become a more embodied self – one that will allow us to grow and flourish. For some, the process of reflection can cause the person to lose the self – that is, become someone they had not intended to be. Reflection can be a threat to ontological security in that it can affect how we make meaning of life and can cause chaos and anxiety (Giddens, 1991). So in order for me to enable others to reflect, it was first necessary for me to consider and reflect on my own self and my identity as a researcher and a person.

So here I am, and who am I? Which self am I at this moment, the student, the friend, the mother, the teacher in some sense, and wife. I feel I am being pulled in so many directions and now here is another one, one where I have to give of myself and where I am not sure I will get anything back. I was not aware that this would cause me this much inner turmoil, was not aware that I would be

required to be this open and authentic, and certainly did not realise that I would be learning more possibly than I needed to know about me. I would have run a mile – I think. Probably not – because I don't think I would have believed it. This must be what Giddens (1991, p 80) was referring to when he said that 'such a situation leads to an unembodied self', one where the individual (me) is 'continually acting out most or all routines'. I really do not want to be acting out routines but I am feeling under real pressure over this. I feel torn between my need to remain private and the need for me to be authentic. Is it possible to be authentic and still keep something back - I don't know. I need to see this as a way of expanding my horizons rather than maintaining a rigid sense of identity where I am limiting my growth and learning. The important thing is to ensure that this change in self is managed in a way that protects my 'ontological security' while preventing a descent into chaos and turbulence. This is about recognising that while I may be fearful of this change, to stay the same would also be detrimental, not growing and maintaining a rigid approach to reflection would probably protect the self that is afraid but it would stifle the self that wants to expand my horizons. How can I ask others to be authentic and reflect on their practice, if I cannot facilitate myself to be authentic and reflect. Therefore, I intend taking the 'bull by the horns'. I will try to reflect in a way that is authentic and true to the values and beliefs I aspire to, but in some way will try to maintain a sense of security where I will not feel too exposed (not sure yet how I will manage this). I need to be mindful of doing this with others also (Personal reflection).

Giddens (1991, p 91) defines ontological security as an emotional phenomenon, incorporating 'the confidence that human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their surrounding social and material environments of action'. It is important to be aware of challenges that occur when implementing an action research study. Discussing and highlighting this I believe is both authentic and necessary. The action research literature is sparse on the impact these challenges have in practice settings and also on the need for some settings to take a longer, slower approach than others and on the impact on researchers and participants. The need for flexibility on the part of the facilitator and willingness to change the approach is often not adequately reflected on in the literature, particularly in relation to attempts to implement the same action research study across settings. This exploration contributes to the current evidence and to the growing body of knowledge on both reflection and action research.

Identifying and understanding challenges (using EVOKE cards to guide reflection)
The self-reflection enabled me to look critically at the engagement of staff in a new light, one that allowed me to understand the reasons for some of the challenges that arose in the study, but also to stand back and realise that the way things were happening was down to the need for staff to, on some level, protect their self-identity. It also helped me recognise that if I felt worried about my ontological security perhaps staff also felt this way – in fact, due to the situations they encounter in the course of their work, staff may have a more valid reason for fearing for their psychological safety (Brown and McCormack, 2011). When issues of passive engagement occurred on one of the units involved in the study, I was able to recognise the influences that caused these challenges but also able to realise that the staff needed to act as they did, and that to rush in and try to change it would be detrimental to their psychological wellbeing.

In an effort to help me understand what may have contributed to the challenges of engagement, leadership influence and power imbalance, I used EVOKE cards to try to decipher my feelings and also what I thought was happening on the unit. These cards are a set of 72 images that can help to evoke a range of memories, reflections or ideas. They are a creative method of exploring feelings and gaining insights into situations, and can help us identify ways to move forward. In this study the cards were spread out, and I picked five whose images appealed to me. This is known as being open to the senses and enabling different ways of knowing and emotions to come to the fore (McCormack and Titchen, 2006) I then used the images selected to help me develop a deeper understanding of some of the challenges that occurred.

The card depicting the old barn reminds me of the feeling I get that old practices are still taking place here and while there is some movement forward there is always a return to the familiar. For me the whole thing has been very much a stop-start effort.


Initially it was very difficult to gain any ground but as the project progressed it appeared we had at least got an amber light where we could make some move forward. This did lead to some positive changes that had an impact on practice, albeit technical practice, but change and movement nonetheless. However, this yellow light was still influenced by the dominant red light that eventually overwhelmed the weaker yellow and shifted everything back to the old familiar.

I feel there are some rays of light/hope that struggle to shine through the dark clouds, but these are restrained and controlled by chains of power. There is a huge power imbalance in the unit and a very hierarchical structure.
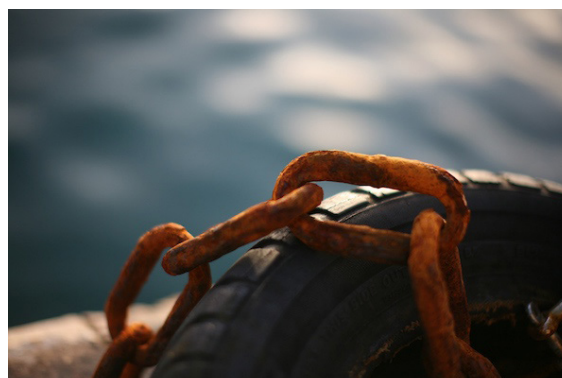
I am finding it difficult to see what I have learned from this. Much like the sun trying to break through the dark clouds I am struggling to see the light, either in the practice or in my feelings about the implementation of the study. I find myself drawn in particular to the chain and the image of the links. They are very rusty, which implies they are old or overused, I find myself thinking of the old ways of working and how the chains represent this. The links also remind me of the way everything is interlinked here and how the rust (attitude) can spread so easily from one link to the other because they are linked. But the rust also implies weakness and the possibility that the links can be broken. Maybe this is showing me there is hope or opportunity for change, or at least to break out of the binds or restrictions that are stopping this happening.

I am frustrated by the one way/only way card; this is not a value I espouse or one that I thought the unit espoused (from values work done early in project). I want there to be lots of ways with lots of ideas that are critically discussed and thought through, that acknowledge everyone's contribution and focus on the care experience of the older adults living here and not primarily on the difficulties of the staff, which is what seems to be currently happening. Both the chain and the one way card are highlighting to me the inability of the staff to speak up. I am thinking of Brown and McCormack's (2011) work on psychologically unsafe environments, and how the influence of the manager may be preventing the staff speaking up or indeed taking control of the way practice is occurring. I am concerned that the staff appear to lack a voice in this setting (Personal reflection).

Our identities are shaped by our experiences – these in some way determine the way we are or act (Horowitz, 2012). Being aware of and working with the relationship that exists between identity, leadership and power at the outset could help minimise challenges to implementation. If I had worked with the nursing leader on identifying her leadership style and used some of the positive elements of that style throughout the study it may have enabled a better outcome. Being aware of the support each setting needs at the outset of a study could have a positive influence on outcomes. I believe that, as a novice researcher, it was not possible to be aware of all of the challenges that can happen within a participatory action research project, as literature tends to focus mainly on the positive outcomes and rarely the challenges. However, even where challenges have been identified it is not certain that being aware of them would have helped in this study.

Narrative as a way of knowing (using poetry to understand context)
Challenges within participatory action research are context and person specific. Therefore, it is necessary for the facilitator to be adaptable, to work with challenges as they present themselves and to develop strategies that can help them work with these challenges and contexts. Stories are strongly influenced by the circumstances of the narrator and by the context in which they are situated. In order to help me understand the situational context of the older people living in the residential care setting where the study took place, I wrote a narrative poem based on data collected from interviews with older people and observations of practice. This poem reflects the lack of acknowledgement of biography, personhood and status that older adults can experience in residential care. It also highlights how we as carers, through engagement using narrative approaches and reflecting critically on practice, can change that experience to one of meaningful interaction and engagement.

Molly's Tale

This is my story
What does it mean
Do you care that I climbed mountains.
Or that I had dreams

to one day be famous,
an author or accountant.

You know me as Molly
A mother and a wife
but that is not the sum total of my life...
My dreams they were vast and some even came true.

This matters to me
Does it matter to you?

I sometimes feel angry
That you do not realise
I climbed Kilimanjaro when I was 35.
I wrote a novel in my 20s and I have 2 degrees.

This is the essence
of who it is to be me.

So I sit here in this nursing home
And my intellect declines
Because no one engages in a way that defines
The me I want to be, the person I am

The one with the accolades,
the parchments and bad hands.

Bad hands from working in a bakery
from sixteen to twenty four
but you didn't know that did you
as you come to my door.

You're pleasant enough
I cannot deny
But our conversation is superficial,
very American pie.

'Good day' 'How are you'
'I hope you are well'
Do you really care...
I cannot tell.

I long for more substance,
to have a real voice.
To be considered in decisions
regarding my life.

I want to contribute,
I have some ideas
I was really quite something
before I came here.

So please do include me
and let me take part.
Ask my opinion
it will be a start

Debate and consensus
make everything clear
When you work in this way
it really shows that you care.

Catherine Buckley 2014

Conclusion

This reflection has been the story of my personal and professional awakening. I did not realise when I undertook this journey that it would be a process of self-discovery as well as a process of learning. I have seen a growth in my understanding of personhood and self, and I have developed an understanding of critical creativity and approaches that value story and biography. Reflection is not a one size fits all. A prescriptive model of reflection may not be comfortable for everyone; the use of creative methods of reflection can unlock thoughts or ideas that otherwise may remain hidden.

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Catherine Buckley (PhD, MSc, BSc, PGCert Narrative Research, RGN), Practice Development Facilitator, Northridge House Education and Research Centre, St. Luke's Home, Mahon, Cork, Ireland.